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Imagining the End Times: Ideology, the Contemporary Disaster Movie *Contagion*

By Matthew Beaumont

It has recently become something of a cliché, at least on the Left, to cite the claim, first made by Fredric Jameson in *Seeds of Time* (1994), that in the current conjuncture it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. "Someone once said," Jameson writes in "Future City" (2003), where he recapitulates and revises the point and where it becomes apparent that he is probably misremembering some comments made by H. Bruce Franklin about J. G. Ballard, "that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism."[1]

Slavoj Žižek has frequently repeated this provocative claim, in articles, books and interviews. "Think about the strangeness of today's situation," he urges in *Zizek!* (2005), for instance, a documentary directed by Astra Taylor:

> Thirty, forty years ago, we were still debating about what the future will be: communist, fascist, capitalist, whatever. Today, nobody even debates these issues. We all silently accept global capitalism is here to stay. On the other hand, we are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes: the whole life on earth disintegrating, because of some virus, because of an asteroid hitting the earth, and so on. So the paradox is, that it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism.

This formulation, which might be characterized more accurately as ironic than paradoxical, is now regularly identified with Žižek as well as Jameson—in part no doubt because the former, to understate the matter, is a more flamboyant semioclast than the latter. In the opening pages of *Capitalist Realism* (2009), for example, Mark Fisher reports with due caution that, "watching *Children*

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of Men [2006], we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism." "That slogan," he continues, "captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."[2]

The constituent failure of the political imagination diagnosed in these terms by both Jameson and Žižek might be designated as an almost pure instance of ideology—at least if we interpret this notoriously complicated and conflicted term, perhaps rather simplistically, as a narrative, universal or particular, that naturalizes the historical, making the politically mutable seem immutable. This was Roland Barthes's emphasis in *Mythologies* (1957). For him, bourgeois ideology was "the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature." This is "the very principle of myth," he emphasized: "It transforms history into nature."[3]

* * *

In the last decade or so, there have appeared a number of Hollywood disaster movies, generally shaped by a pious, politically cheap ecological message, that have displaced historical end times onto natural ones: History onto Nature. The demise of the American *imperium* has been collapsed into the end of the world—as if people might not notice the relative decline of the U.S. if they are sufficiently distracted, as in *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), to take an example almost at random, by an apocalyptic flood that obliterates not just Wall Street but New York itself and every other metropolitan city on the face of the globe. This is the equivalent of that old trick of concealing a corpse by setting fire to the house in which the homicide has been committed. But it raises this logic, the logic of hiding things in plain sight, to a hitherto unprecedented level. The regime of the spectacle dictates that, at the same time exhibited and rendered invisible, it will appear, as Guy Debord phrased it, "out of reach and beyond dispute."[4]

In the case of the purloined mode of production, the injunction is to conceal the corrosion of the U.S. model of capitalism beneath the biblical destruction of absolutely everything. There's a chance that the masses might not notice the relative decline of U.S. capital if, on the IMAX screen that looms above them, everything from the family pet to humanity itself disappears along with it—for in the flood of debris it will, with any luck, be impossible to spot. Here is a dream of what might be described as primitive disaccumulation, the process whereby the world is brutally and rapidly stripped of its clutter prior to the imposition of some more streamlined version of capitalism. In *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), Naomi Klein calls this "disaster capitalism." Žižek has confirmed that Klein was correct "when, in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, she described the way global capitalism exploits catastrophes (wars, political crises, natural

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disasters) to get rid of 'old' social constraints and impose its agenda on the 'clean slate' created by disaster." "Perhaps the forthcoming ecological crises," he adds, "far from undermining capitalism, will serve as its greatest boost."[5]

Returning to Jameson's and Žižek's nostrum about the end of capitalism and the end of the world, it needs to be added that both the financial shocks that have convulsed the West since 2008 and the revolutionary insurrections that have reconfigured the political geography of the Middle East more recently—or, the concatenation of these economic and political crises—have made it seem less plausible. In the images of an occupied Tahrir Square, for example, and even those of an occupied Wall Street, it became possible to imagine not just an end to the political and economic regimes against which those involved were protesting, but the origins of something else. Their basic message is, as Žižek has put it, that "the taboo has been broken, we do not live in the best possible world: we are allowed, obliged even, to think about the alternatives."[6] Tahrir Square, to take the more important example, seemed to represent one of those spaces of hope of which David Harvey has spoken, spaces that prompt us to believe that society can be "remade and reimagined";[7] and as such, in spite of its contradictions, it momentarily appeared to contain intimations of a postcapitalist future, a society shaped by participatory forms of democracy.

Cultural discourse, however, tends to lag behind political discourse. It is therefore not surprising that no genuinely popular product of mass culture has as yet risked attempting to bring the collective imagination up to date by staging the collapse of capitalism as such (though the 2011 movie *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* portrays an event that looks pleasingly close to a proletarian insurrection). Lots of disaster movies have been produced recently, as I intimated, but the agent of destruction tends to be a tsunami or a twister rather than corporate capitalism itself. According to the logic of sublimation, economic crisis is in this context still displaced into ecological crisis; that is, into the traditional aesthetic domain of the sublime. Animatronics experts rewire history to make it look like nature; CGI technicians transform the reality of the world into an image of the world (to repeat Barthes's formulation). In Hollywood, predictably, it is, in a precise sense, business as usual.

In mainstream cinema at present, it is not so much men and women who make history as superhuman or even supernatural agents—including gods. These gods do not do so in circumstances of their own choosing, since human beings, in their arrogant disregard for ecology, have messed about with these; but it is these gods that nonetheless make history. In general, they disguise themselves, just as the classical gods tended to do, as forces of nature: avalanches, earthquakes, fires, or floods. It is in familiar incarnations of this kind that they take revenge for humanity's thoughtless erosion of the earth's resources. But in some cases the gods disguise themselves as—gods. *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010), a children's fantasy film that opens with a meeting between Poseidon and Zeus on top of the Empire State Building, is one instance of this. So are *Thor* (2011) and both *Clash of the Titans* (2010)

and *Wrath of the Titans* (2012). An example in a slightly different genre is *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), an elaborately and tediously self-conscious horror movie. It transpires in this film that the all-American kids on which its narrative centers are being victimized and tortured—by a comprehensive range of mythological monsters—in order to appease primitive subterranean gods who demand an annual sacrifice of youthful human flesh. (The film's best joke is that, alone among these nubile teenagers, it is the stoner, a college dropout modeled on Shaggy in *Scooby-Doo*, who grasps the logic of this cosmic conspiracy, which he then heroically and selflessly resists.)

It is possible to argue that the role of the gods in contemporary cinema is allegorical of those hedge-fund entrepreneurs whose Olympian arrogance and greed continues to cause the destruction of so many ordinary people's lives in Europe and the United States (this image of an almost omnipotent but fatally capricious elite of financial demigods is the creepy impression of *Fool's Gold* [2009], Gillian Tett's fascinating account of the activities of the derivatives team at J. P. Morgan prior to the crash of 2008). The gods are agents of free-market capitalism at its most cruelly capricious and opaque. "Over the last few years," Žižek recently observed in a discussion of *The Wire*, "we do indeed seem to have witnessed the rise of a new prosopopoeia where the thing [that] speaks is the market itself, increasingly referred to as if it were a living entity that reacts, warns, makes its opinions clear, etcetera, up to and including demanding sacrifices in the manner of an ancient pagan god."[8] In this context, the double displacement that the films I have cited enact, from history onto nature and from nature onto mythology, is a reactionary one, insofar as it implies that, even in the advanced capitalist nations people are little more than flies to wanton gods—politically both helpless and hopeless.

* * *

In the space that remains I want to turn to a rather more interesting and contradictory cinematic response to the contemporary crisis of capitalism, though one that, in spite of its superficially scrupulous liberal credentials, is probably no less reactionary than *The Cabin in the Woods*. This is *Contagion* (2011), directed by Steven Soderbergh. *Contagion* is a film about a virus, not unlike SARS, that threatens to destroy humanity. It is an all-star disaster movie centered on a disease, then. But, like many of the current products of what might be called generic engineering, including *The Cabin in the Woods*, it nostalgically patches together other popular forms too, from horror to the conspiracy thriller (the critic of the *New York Times* noted that it "update[s] 1970s paranoia freakouts like *All the President's Men*").[9] It thus resuscitates several 1970s genres at once, reviving memories of the economic crisis in which, for obvious reasons, those movie genres thrived.

In "Future City," Jameson elaborates his initial claim that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism by speculating that the

present time is typified, more precisely and more progressively, by "the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world."[10] Presumably he means "the attempt to imagine *the end* of capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world"—though if this is a typographical or editorial error, it is suggestive enough, for it offers a reminder that, as Walter Benjamin insisted, under capitalism, "the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[11] The limits of the contemporary political imagination, Jameson appears to be suggesting, can be exploited for allegorical purposes and so made to perform a critical function. So a film about some unstoppable natural cataclysm that smashes a metropolitan city and its population to pieces might be interpreted as a coded attempt to contemplate the implosion of capitalism.

It is easy enough to contend that *Contagion*, made in the midst of the global financial crisis, and set in a constellation of global locations, like Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000) and so many other contemporary films that might be characterized as totalizing-by-numbers, is exactly this sort of movie. After all, the central metaphor of the film, that of infection, is a deliberately labile one. It is intended to evoke the uncontrollable and highly dangerous reproductive capacities in a globalized society not simply of disease but of all kinds of communication, from rumor to more technological, more highly mediated forms like the Internet. Soderbergh's almost pathological loathing for bloggers, who are in this film the most minacious and mendacious of all agents of misinformation, is effortlessly if not entirely deliberately captured in Jude Law's characteristically dislikeable performance—the blogger as blagger. One of the film's most prominent victims is, implicitly, the newspaper industry: "Print media is dying! It's *dying*!"

In the single most powerful moment of the film—ironically, the couple of seconds before the action or dialogue begins—Soderbergh cunningly makes it clear that cinema itself is part of this economy of communication. When the screen goes black, after the distributors' logos have faded from the screen, a sudden, perfectly ordinary-sounding cough, which instantly makes us conscious of our neighbors in the cinema, signals our susceptibility to contamination. It is a neat dramatization of what Žižek has characterized as the "over-proximity" of the neighbor, the intrusion of their "inhumanity," which here takes the form of the parasite to which they might be acting as the host, into the space that the subject carefully demarcates and protects through distancing devices such as custom and habit.[12] But this cough also signals our suggestibility, our susceptibility to the media that transmit information and misinformation. At this point, if at no other, the film's form brilliantly enacts its content. Soderbergh's original intention to shoot the movie in 3D would have reinforced this incipient sense that the cinema itself is part of the film's sensorium, intruding the film's surfaces, with their traces of contamination, into the space inhabited by the audience. In fact, the cough with which the film starts is something like a residue of Soderbergh's 3D conception, the aural equivalent of a 3D effect that penetrates the cinema's fourth wall and forces the spectator onto the defensive.

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As the narrative begins, it becomes clear that this cough belongs to Gwyneth Paltrow, who is seated in an airport bar. It later transpires that she represents what epidemiologists call the disease's "index patient," in other words, she is the first case to be scientifically identified in the relevant population. Paltrow dies a pretty horrible death a couple of scenes later, disappearing from the screen even more rapidly than Janet Leigh in *Psycho* (1960); and this death is capped, so to speak, by a particularly gruesome autopsy in which her scalp is carefully, graphically peeled from her skull. But if you feel disgusted, or even secretly gratified, by this undignified image of the famously wholesome actress, don't feel bad—she deserves it.

The reason Paltrow's character makes the perfect index case for a pandemic is, first, that she is a business executive of some kind who is in international transit; and, second, that she is taking advantage of a flight connection to pursue an extramarital affair. In a double sense, this is a dirty stopover. Paltrow's cosmopolitanism and promiscuousness—her thoughtless consumption of fossil fuels and selfish recourse to casual sex—prove to be a killer combination. A moralistic and faintly misogynistic undercurrent—in which, as in *Psycho* and so many of Hitchcock's other movies, an attractive blonde is violently punished for the role she has been forced to perform—is not the least disquieting of reasons for feeling suspicious about the film's apparently impeccable liberalism.

Stepping back from the autopsy table, though, and adopting a broader perspective, one might even argue that, in allegorical terms, this is in fact a movie directly about ideology, in both general and specific senses of the term. Generally speaking, as I have hinted, it can be construed as a critique of the apparently spontaneous diffusion of misinformation throughout society and of its deleterious consequences. On this interpretation, the film's politics are premised on the assumption that (as Henry James once put it) relations stop nowhere; and that, in a world in which almost every individual is intimately connected to others by elaborate chains of communication, no one can escape the contaminating effects either of bodies or discourses that have been corrupted. *Contagion* appears to subscribe, then, to an "epidemiological" theory of ideology, according to which people are simply the carriers and transmitters of ideology. The politics of this conception of ideology are implicitly undemocratic, because it assumes that the mass of people are merely passive agents of ideologically polluted ideas and by extension that it is the responsibility of an enlightened elite of one kind or another to cleanse society. "Nothing Spreads like Fear" is *Contagion*'s strapline.

More specifically, Soderbergh's film sometimes looks uncomfortably like an allegorical attack on the sort of ideologies—in the old-fashioned sense, meaning more or less systematic-looking sets of ideas—that threaten U.S. hegemony. This evokes use of the phrase "ideological contagion" by U.S. policy makers during the second half of the last century in order to demonize Islamist and socialist politics, disseminated from the Middle East and Latin America respectively. In those contexts, it served as a chilling pseudoclinical euphemism for

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the spread of subversion. In a review of *Contagion* for the *New Yorker*, film critic David Denby conjured up memories of this older, post–Cold War rhetoric by classifying it, revealingly, as "a 9/11 anniversary movie." If one forgets the film's villains for a moment, who are in any case relatively hard to identify aside from Jude Law, and if one focuses instead on its heroes, this is a pretty plausible ascription. The good guys, as Denby observes, "are all employees of the federal government"—mainly state scientists or technocrats and Homeland Security officials.[13] So it is no surprise to learn that Soderbergh received extensive cooperation from the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention when making the movie.

There is one coded reference in the film to 9/11. Lawrence Fishburne, who plays the fictional head of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, announces at one point that the department's most pressing task, after the appearance of the virus, "is to find ground zero." It emerges that this ground zero, the point at which the disease first launched its attack, is Hong Kong. More precisely, it is the Hong Kong casino in which the feckless executive Paltrow frittered away her final evening in China—not simply gambling but ill-advisedly shaking hands with an unhygienic chef who had just filleted a pig that, so it eventually transpires, had been bitten by an infected bat. This is the origin of the contagion's "antigenic shift," the moment at which the species barrier is leapt.

The cockpit of the disease in *Contagion* is, thus, a Chinese market, chaotic and dangerously unregulated. In this respect, Soderbergh draws on the circumstances of the outbreak of SARS in 2003, when a horseshoe bat passed the infection on to a civet cat, which was then sold for the purpose of human consumption in a market in Guangdong province in southern China. Subsequently, the disease was disseminated by passengers on a flight from Hong Kong to Beijing and thence across the globe—they were infected, as David Quammen has recently explained, by "a feverish man with a worsening cough."[14] Like Paltrow's character. This process, whereby national and international air travel rapidly accelerates the dissemination of the disease, is sometimes called "jet-spread."[15] Paltrow's picturesque puking is thus a symptom both of the rampant and corrupt form of capitalism with which China threatens to contaminate and out-compete the United States and of "globalization" as such.

In an additional sense, to return to Jameson's and Žižek's terms once again, it is inviting to read *Contagion* as an attempt to imagine the end of capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world. The social disorder that Soderbergh stages when the virus is raging across the United States, which is exacerbated by the fact that Law's character (the narcissistic internet journalist) has disseminated false information about the medical efficacy of a useless homeopathic substance derived from forsythia, closely resembles the effects of an economic crisis—in part because all this chaos has of course created one. Some time shortly before the entire U.S. population learns of the infection, one character predicts that "when word gets out, there will be a run

on the banks, gas stations, grocery stores, you name it." And so it comes to pass. Some of the film's most memorable scenes portray this social collapse, in images of rubbish and corpses piling up on the streets, looters trashing shops, and soldiers ineffectually operating curfews. These scenes offer the audience the vicarious thrills of what Žižek, in his discussion of the U.K. riots of 2011, has characterized as "a consumerist carnival of destruction."[16] Lenin famously called revolution a carnival of the oppressed: this is something like their shopping spree.

* * *

At the core of Soderbergh's increasingly apocalyptic cityscapes—to pursue this reading of the film as a coded meditation on capitalist crisis—is the commodity. Or, if not the commodity, the object. As the etymological origins of the word *contagion* suggest, this is a film all about touch. For it is through touch that the virus is passed on—as Kate Winslet's luckless character, a medical consultant, makes clear when she points out in panicky tones that people touch their faces on average between two and three thousand times a day. More particularly, it is through handling and exchanging objects in their everyday lives that people spread the disease. In other words, it is the traffic of commodities and people in an international system of capitalist exchange that ensures the infection is rapidly diffused across the globe. The commodification of social relations underlies this logic and is one of its principal agents.

In *Contagion*, all objects are transmuted into fomites; that is, substances that carry infectious organisms on their surfaces. In the film's opening scene, for example, where Paltrow telephones her lover from the airport bar (one of those familiar nonspaces that incubate exotic diseases along with an infectious sense of anomie), Soderbergh's camera lingers unhealthily on the objects she touches, especially the peanuts in the bowl in front of her. Every object in the picture seems to be infected—as indeed does the entire object world, inside and outside the screen, including the armrests in the cinema, the carton of popcorn in one's hand, and so on. As I have already suggested, this is one of the senses in which, in some virtual rather than actual sense, if the distinction can be maintained in this context, the film is indeed 3D.

The movie therefore creates its most unsettling effects by revealing, according to the uncanny logic of the commodity, that apparently ordinary, self-identical objects are in reality inhabited by a hostile, alien force. Soderbergh's camera defamiliarizes these familiar objects, implicitly identifying them as commodities, the ciphers of alienated social relations rather than as things in themselves. The film exhibits the fact that all these objects are defined by their exchange value as distinct from their use value. They are the economic equivalent of fomites. Above all, in this first scene, Paltrow's credit card, which she hands to the bartender in order to pay for her drink, plays a significant role, according to this interpretation of the film at least, because it

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fleetingly renders the outlines of *Contagion*'s economic allegory visible. Here the virus implicitly features as something like the obscene trace of the Real of capital.

But, like the other less sophisticated disaster movies I have mentioned, *Contagion* also comprises a failure of the political imagination. This failure can be grasped, adopting the method of ideological critique pioneered by Pierre Macherey, by attending to the film's "not-said." "What is important in the work," according to him, "is what it does not say."[17] The constitutive silence of *Contagion*, which according to an Althusserian irony articulates the film's ideological assumptions, is money. *Contagion* does not contain a single image of cash being exchanged. There is no money shot. In spite of the promising presence of Paltrow's credit card in the opening scene, then, Soderbergh refuses to represent the object or agent that, above all others, shapes social relations in capitalist society. It is a revealing oversight, given that coins and bank notes, which in epidemiological terms must be the most ubiquitous fomites about, circulate more rapidly and more widely than any other commodities. The film thus suppresses the supreme emblem of those alienated material relations in which social life is imbricated under capitalism. Money is the crucial "concrete universality," but it is missing from the film.

The metaphor of infection therefore turns out to be a curiously limited one for exploring the connectedness and (to employ a clumsy term) replicativeness of the contemporary social formation. Its advantage is that, like the political conspiracy that according to Soderbergh's film is an analogous species of contagion, it provides what Jameson once called "a formal pretext to touch all the bases in the urban landscape."[18] Indeed, it enables Soderbergh to touch all the bases in the global landscape. But its crucial disadvantage is that it uses this device both to occlude the commodity relations it evokes and to present a comprehensively flattened and indiscriminate picture of the relevant social geography. Deploying disease as the film's dominant trope enables Soderbergh to suggest that everyone is equally susceptible to contagion, conspiratorial fear, and socio-economic chaos. This is misleading, to put it mildly. It falsifies the social effects of disease itself, which for reasons too obvious to explicate are more likely to affect the poor than the rich; and, symptomatically, it makes no effort to understand the central mechanisms of either exchange or exploitation in class society. In sum, it exemplifies Barthes's definition of ideology as the operation "through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature."

It is tempting to interpret *Contagion* as an attempt "to imagine the end of capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world," in Jameson's original formulation. In spite of its allegorical potential, though—specifically its use of disease as a trope for thinking about ideology and globalization—*Contagion* finally admits that it is, after all, easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Žižek is fond of paraphrasing a line from *Duck Soup* (1933), one of his favorite movies, in which Groucho Marx says, "Gentlemen,

Chicolini here may look like an idiot, and sound like an idiot, but don't let that fool you: he really is an idiot."[19] *Contagion* might look and sound like a natural disaster movie; but don't let that fool you: it really is a natural disaster movie.

Notes

1. See Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii; and "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (May/June 2003), 76. The original association of the end of capitalism and the end of the world, where the claim made is rather different, is to be found in H. Bruce Franklin, "What Are We to Make of J. G. Ballard's Apocalypse?" There, Franklin accuses Ballard of "mistaking the end of capitalism for the end of the world"; and asks in conclusion, "What could Ballard create if he were able to envision the end of capitalism as not the end, but the beginning, of a human world?" http://www.jgballard.ca/criticism/ballard_apocalypse_1979.html
2. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 1. Note that so often is Žižek cited in connection with this dictum that some ill-informed commentators even ascribe it to him: "One of Žižek's best known sound-bytes [sic] of a few years ago," writes Duncan Simpson in an online review of *Living in the End Times* (2010), "was that today it was easier to imagine the end of the world rather than an end to capitalism." http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/book-reviews/5720-slavoj-zizek-living-in-the-end-times
3. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), 141, 129.
4. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicolson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), 15.
5. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 329. If this dream is ideological, in the old-fashioned sense of promoting the class interests of the bourgeoisie, then in some recent science-fiction films and novels it also encodes a utopian impulse. In a review of Margaret Atwood's *After the Flood* (2009), Jameson notes that the lethal, man-made plague invoked by the book's title, like the Biblical Flood, "fulfills its purpose, namely to cleanse the world of the toxic garbage of human society, leaving the few survivors (mostly people trapped in inaccessible and thereby uncontaminated spaces) to start something new." See "Then You Are Them," *London Review of Books* 31: 17 (10 September 2009), 7–8.
6. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), 77.
7. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 159.
8. Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 94.
9. Manohla Dargis, "A Nightmare Pox on Your Civilized World," *New York Times*, September 8, 2011. http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/09/09/movies/contagion-steven-soderberghs-plague-paranoia-review.html
10. Jameson, "Future City," 76.
11. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), 248.
12. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 123.

13. David Denby, "Call the Doctor," *New Yorker* September 19, 2011. http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2011/09/19/110919crci_cinema_denby
14. David Quammen, *Spillover: Animal Infection and the Next Human Pandemic* (New York: Norton, 2012), 168.
15. See Mike Davis, *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 42. Davis offers a characteristically sharp and informative polemical account of the politics and economics, as well as the science, of contemporary pandemics.
16. Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 60.
17. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), 87.
18. Fredric Jameson, "Conspiracy as Totality," *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: BFI, 1995), 32.
19. See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 73.

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